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From Arabia to Zion

Mesopotamian Muddle

Dennis Ross

RARELY HAVE we faced more daunting problems in the Middle East and seemed farther away from resolving or even defusing them. There is surely no more important foreign-policy priority than finding ways to ameliorate the challenges and conflicts that confront us in the region. This won't be done with slogans or declarations or even "surges" that are disconnected from a clear political and diplomatic strategy; nor will it be done with international meetings that are not thoroughly prepared and choreographed in advance.

America's interests in the Middle East can be advanced with the application of real statecraft—not a hallmark of the Bush Administration. Good statecraft marries objectives and means. It depends on reality-based, not faith-based, assessments that make it possible to shape tangible objectives while also identifying the means available for achieving them.

Often our own available means will be insufficient to achieve the objectives we set for ourselves; we need to persuade others to join us. That means framing our objectives in ways others are likely to accept. It is far easier to get friends and non-friends, who have substantial influence or leverage over others, to cooperate when they agree with the objectives we have established. Working intensively to forge productive partnerships is a central task of statecraft.

Certainly, even the best application of statecraft will not always succeed in achieving the objectives we believe to be important. This does not mean giving up our desire to transform unacceptable realities, but it requires us to understand those realities before we try to change them.

So how well are we doing now in terms of matching our objectives and means in the Middle East today? And, if the answer is not well, what do we need to do differently?

Containment in Iraq?

FROM THE outset in Iraq, we have never matched our objectives to our means. If our objective was destroying Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, we are lucky that Iraq did not have any because we did not have sufficient troops either to

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seize control of all the suspected WMD sites or to prevent those materials from being smuggled out of the country. Alternatively, if the objective was stabilizing Iraq and engaging in nation-building to promote democracy, we also failed to marshal sufficient forces to carry out the essential tasks of restoring law and order and making sure that we had a monopoly on the means of violence.

What produced this mismatch between our objectives and means was a faith-based assessment that led the administration to conclude that everything would neatly fall into place when Saddam Hussein lost power. And when everything fell apart the United States and what remained of the Iraqi government lacked the strategy, the plan or the means to deal with it.

What about today? Last January, the president adopted a new approach, sending a “surge” of U.S. forces to Iraq. This was designed to create an environment in which Iraqi leaders across sectarian divides would feel secure enough to forge a new national compact. In other words, the surge has not been an objective, but a tool designed to make a political solution in Iraq possible. And that is the rub: The surge is based on the premise that Iraqi leaders aren’t forging political compromises because they aren’t secure enough to do so. Unfortunately, once again, we have an assessment that is basically flawed.

As bad as it is in Iraq, it could be far worse; American forces keep the lid on total chaos and make it safe enough for everyone in Iraq—and its neighbors as well—to avoid hard choices. This has to change. The prospect of a U.S. withdrawal gives us leverage with both Iraqis and the neighboring states, whose stake in containing the conflict in Iraq will go up exponentially after American troops leave—after all, the alternative is likely to suck them into an ongoing and increasingly expensive conflict.

I would redefine our objective in Iraq. We cannot produce ideal results, but we must focus on preventing the worst from taking place. Containment should thus be our essential objective now. We want to keep instability in Iraq from spilling over and affecting the region. We also want to prevent jihadists from being able to cross easily into and out of Iraq.

Nonetheless, we need to see containment for what it is: the best of the bad options available. We have to focus on what is possible, not what we would most prefer. I believe that Iraq eventually will end up having a central government with limited powers, provinces with extensive autonomy and some means for sharing revenues—much like the soft partition advocated by Les Gelb and Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE).¹ It can either reach such an outcome through exhaustion or through a managed transition. At this point, I am afraid civil war is more likely than cooperation, so I would position us to limit the consequences of civil war even while trying to head it off. This leads me to a set of policy recommendations that would employ three parallel sets of interlocking negotiations, which I term “containment plus.”

First, since President Bush is already saying the surge is permitting us to draw down forces, go a step further and announce (after privately informing the Maliki government) that we will negotiate a timetable for our withdrawal with the Iraqi government. This gives Iraqis input into the timing and shape of the withdrawal and doesn’t simply impose it on them. It tells them withdrawal is coming, but in a way that does not necessarily leave them in the lurch or leave them with the sole option of building up their militias. It also gives us the leverage to orchestrate the withdrawal in a way (regarding timing, location and materiel support) that benefits those who are most responsive to us.

¹See Joseph R. Biden “Breathing Room” from the Sept./Oct. 2006 issue of *The National Interest*.

Second, set a date for convening a national reconciliation conference and for the first time mandate that it will not disband until agreement has been reached. President Bush and General Petraeus have now essentially redefined the objective of the surge to be local empowerment rather than political compromise in Baghdad. The participants in this conference should, thus, be from the local areas and Baghdad. Use the conference to create what presently does not exist—namely, a political bridge between the local areas and the center. Success in this conference would mean greater flexibility in our approach to the withdrawal timetable, while a stalemated conference would produce the opposite. To increase the prospects of the conference working, we will need to play a mediating role first in setting the agenda of the conference and then in its ongoing negotiations.

Finally, under the aegis of the regional conference on Iraq, we should try to broker understandings among Iraq's neighbors on how they can contain the conflict. I have my doubts about whether these states will ever agree on what they want for Iraq, but they might agree on what they fear about it. From that standpoint, we should not be negotiating bilaterally with Iran on Iraq; instead, we should be trying to broker critical understandings between the Saudis and Iranians on what they will do to limit or contain the conflict. No such understandings will suddenly end the Iranian-Saudi competition in the region, but, for their own reasons, they may well have a stake in finding ways to inhibit sectarian warfare in Iraq and monitoring any such agreements that would achieve such an outcome.

And this brings me to the second challenge we face: Iran.

Preventing an Iranian Bomb

THE ADMINISTRATION sees Iran as presenting challenges everywhere in the region: Fueling the capabilities of Shi'a militias to attack U.S. forces in Iraq; providing arms to a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan; rebuilding the Hizballah arsenal in Lebanon; and funding and arming Hamas (especially in Gaza), while also supporting terrorist attacks against Israel. Although all of these behaviors are clearly a source of deep concern, the administration has put stopping the Iranian nuclear program at the top of its agenda.

Much of the world, as evidenced by UN Security Council statements and resolutions, believes that Iran is intent on developing nuclear weapons. There appears to be a strong consensus in the Iranian elite to pursue this program given that it has continued under the regimes of diverse presidents like Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (the pragmatist), Mohamed Khatami (the liberal) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (the radical).

But does that mean there is no way to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear capability? It will obviously not be easy, but there are clear indications that while the leadership and the relevant elites would like to have nuclear weapons, they don't all necessarily want them at any price. And, on the nuclear issue, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has, according to Ray Takeyh, broadened the "parameters of the debate to include relevant elites from across the political spectrum."²

The signs of debate are clear and emerged more prominently when the UN Security Council began discussing imposing sanctions on Iran last fall. For example, Rafsanjani, who remains an important power broker in Iran, released a secret letter last October that Ayatollah Khomeini had written in 1988 to explain why he made the decision to

²Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Imam* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

end the war with Iraq. Commentary in the Iranian press on the secret letter emphasized that Khomeini understood that at times one has to adjust ideology to meet reality—a pointed message for the Revolutionary Guard and the current Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Similarly, after the first sanctions resolution was adopted in December of last year, the newspaper *Fomburi Islami*, which is associated with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, accused President Ahmadinejad of using the nuclear issue to “divert” the attention of the people away from the “problems of the government.” Many Iranian leaders are acutely aware of Iran’s economic situation and the consequences of facing severe economic sanctions.

President Ahmadinejad has made extravagant promises to the Iranian public about bringing oil revenues to every table. But the public is facing growing economic pressure—not greater abundance. Consumer subsidies are becoming harder to sustain and gasoline rationing has been introduced. Worse, the public is dealing with high inflation and high unemployment—and the picture promises to become even bleaker with oil and natural-gas output declining due to antiquated infrastructure. Already, Iran’s oil exports are declining (with the country falling 300,000 barrels short of its daily OPEC export quota)—and they provide the lion’s share of government revenues.³

The mullahs know that in order to sustain social peace, they need these revenues to continue to subsidize the whole panoply of the public’s consumer and health needs. High oil prices may have been a bonanza—the price of oil having gone from \$27 a barrel in 2003 to \$77 in the summer of 2007—but the mismanagement of the Iranian economy, the limited application of sanctions and the successful efforts of the U.S. Treasury Department to blacklist certain Iranian banks for their involvement in terrorist financing are taking their toll. One of Iran’s leading clerics—Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, the judiciary chief—recently reacted to Ahmadinejad’s replacement of oil and industry ministers with a broadside against the Iranian president (described by one paper, *Tehran Emrouz*, as “unprecedented criticism”) that appeared to reflect anxiety about the state of the economy: “Unfortunately, the treatment of some managers is the source of heavy blows to the Iranian system.”

Two conclusions emerge from the foregoing discussion: Iran has real economic vulnerabilities and, given the signs of internal debate, they create the potential to change Tehran’s behavior on the nuclear issue. The problem to date is that potential is not being translated into a new reality. Iran is proceeding, at a determined pace, to build centrifuges to enrich uranium. Though it apparently still faces technological hurdles when operating its cascades of centrifuges on a full-time basis, Iran continues to build them. Given the number of operating centrifuges Tehran will have by the end of the year, it will likely be in a position sometime next year to stockpile fissile material for the eventual production of nuclear bombs.⁴

Once again, we see a mismatch between our objective and the means we are currently employing to achieve that objective. We have slow-motion diplomacy at the UN Security Council for economic sanctions against Iran—three very limited resolutions have been adopted in the last ten months. But the measures still do not really attack the Iranian economy. Arrayed against this ineffective diplomacy is Iran’s fast-paced nuclear development.

³Gal Luft, “Iran’s Oil Industry: A House of Cards?,” *inFocus*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (Summer 2007).

⁴David E. Sanger, “Inspectors Cite Big Gain by Iran on Nuclear Fuel,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2007.

We could potentially change Iran's behavior by playing on its economic vulnerabilities more aggressively—but we are running out of time. We don't have to give up our efforts at the UN, but we have to focus much more on affecting those who control the economic lifeline to Iran, especially as it relates to investments in and development of the Iranian energy sector.

Two years ago I was at a dinner with the former German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, in which he recounted a conversation he had with Ali Khamenei in Iran. The supreme leader told Fischer that the West would never be willing to absorb \$140 per barrel oil. What this really meant was that the Ayatollah well understood that the West was not willing to pay a price in order to impose one on Iran. The corollary, of course, is the following: If the West *is* willing, Iran would have a problem.

Though the Europeans have supported UN Security Council sanctions, they continue to do business with Iran and, as of last year, European Union countries were still providing approximately \$18 billion in credit guarantees to their companies investing in Iran. It is pretty difficult to convince the Iranian leadership that the economic lifeline is going to be cut when European governments are still providing credit guarantees.

So how can we get the Europeans to change their minds (and therefore the Iranians)? I would start by framing the issue differently. We need to establish that Iran going nuclear is a tipping point. If Tehran crosses that line, the Middle East will become nuclearized, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime will be destroyed, and a far more dangerous and less predictable world will emerge.

This is hardly an exaggeration. If Iran goes nuclear, Saudi Arabia almost certainly will as well. They will not allow Iran to use a nuclear shield behind which it can engage in coercion and subversion; they will want their own answer, not an American security guarantee. Given the Saudi relationship with Pakistan, it is quite possible that they already have a deal either to buy nuclear weapons or to station Pakistani nukes on their territory. If the Saudis go nuclear, will Egypt allow Saudi Arabia to be the only Arab nuclear power? I doubt it. In a meeting I had with a senior Egyptian official this past spring, he bluntly stated, "If Iran goes nuclear, it is the end of the NPT."

The European Union is committed to building and enhancing international regimes, not being a party to their demise—and they have strong vested interests in keeping the NPT operational. This is no small matter for Brussels.

Second, we should urge the Israelis to go to the Europeans and convey a message that the Europeans need to hear—at least in private. Until now, the Israelis have been rightly hesitant to make the Iranian nuclear program an Israeli, not an international, concern, keeping mum. Senior Israelis now need to say: "You may think you can live with Iranian nuclear weapons because you fear the use of force against Iran more than you fear Iran with nukes. But we don't have that luxury; even if we wanted to live with an Iran with such weapons, they are telling us that they won't let us live. Listen to Ahmadinejad. He declares we have no right to exist, he says we will disappear and, most recently, he said the countdown to our destruction is near at hand. We won't wait to be hit by an Iranian nuclear bomb. So if you want to avoid the use of force against Iran because you worry about the backlash and anger in the Muslim world—and the prospects for increased terror—you must ratchet up the economic pressure now to change Iranian behavior or you will make the use of force more and not less likely." Such a private Israeli message would get Europe's attention and concentrate minds on the need to make some choices.

Finally, we need to directly present the Europeans with a new proposal. The European officials negotiating with the Iranians are convinced that a deal is possible on the

nuclear issue, but only if the United States is also at the table. They have told me that any such deal will involve not just political and economic inducements, but also require direct security assurances from America. They argue that the Iranians are fixated on the United States, and that the real payoff for the Iranians ultimately must come from Washington. Consequently, the Europeans want us at the table. Today we won't join the negotiations unless the Iranians suspend their uranium enrichment. They refuse a suspension, so we are stuck.

It is time to try something new: Tell the Europeans we will join them at the table provided they cut the economic lifeline to Tehran. That means no more credit guarantees, no more technology transfers and no more investment, particularly in the energy sector. The essence of statecraft is often asking someone to do something hard—in this case, for the Europeans to cut economic ties with Iran—in exchange for something badly needed. We would drop our condition on suspending uranium enrichment, we would join the Europeans at the table and the Iranians would also see that the West is prepared to incur a price to impose one on them.

The key right now to altering the Iranian calculus on the nuclear issue is to convince a significant part of the leadership that the economic price is going to be very steep if they stay on their current path. Statecraft is about exercising leverage—both negative and positive. Concentrating Iranian minds on the price is one thing; showing them there is a way out is another. Backing them into a corner where they feel the only outcome is their humiliation won't work. Putting those in the leadership who are mindful of the domestic costs of economic isolation in a position where they can say, "The costs are too high, so what can we get for giving up the nuclear program or at least deferring it for an extended time?" could work well.

Our current policy promises to leave us with two unacceptable choices: Use military force to set the Iranian nuclear program back or live with an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. If both are unacceptable, we had better find a third way to deal with the problem. Though we are running out of time, it is not too late to exercise statecraft to produce that third way.

Statecraft, Israel and the Palestinians

IF GOOD statecraft starts with having clear objectives shaped by reality-based assessments, the logical question to ask is what our objective should be now that the Palestinian Authority exists only in the West Bank. Indeed, with a Hamas-led regime in Gaza, what choices do we have on peacemaking?

Our essential objective should be ensuring that the Palestinian cause remains led by a secular, national movement and not an Islamist one. If Hamas comes to dominate the Palestinian cause, we will see a national conflict transformed into a religious one. National conflicts are difficult but solvable—religious ones are not.

This is how we must frame the issue: It is not one of moderates versus extremists, but nationalists against Islamists. The Islamists must not succeed, for they will make peacemaking impossible. For those who say that Hamas is already embedded in Palestinian society and cannot be excluded from the Palestinian future, they misread one very important reality. Hamas has a credo, and its leaders are not looking to moderate themselves. Could Hamas make adjustments or even split? Only if Fatah and the independent nationalists make themselves competitive enough to show they will win the allegiance of the Palestinian public.

This won't be achieved by only aiming to make the West Bank appear successful in

comparison to a failing Gaza. There needs to be a political mechanism or party that is the vehicle of success—someone needs to organize at the local level, and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank does not have the means, the structure or the people for doing so. Fatah does have the structure and the people, but it must remake itself. It must show that it will organize at the grass-roots level, deliver services and not just rhetoric, present a new face with new leaders, displace all those associated with widespread corruption and offer a real political platform for the future. The Bush Administration is right to want to support President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, but they must not ignore Fatah or the need for transparency and reform in the process. Hamas has exploited the image of donor monies going directly into the hands of corrupt officials, never to reach the public, and will surely try to do so again.

So what will show that the secular nationalists are delivering and building their credibility and authority, at least in the West Bank? Talk to Palestinian activists there—and I have met with nearly fifty in my last two trips—and you will hear that three areas matter: mobility, economic renewal and a credible political process. Mobility because Israeli checkpoints and barriers restrict movement throughout the West Bank and make travel between Palestinian cities and villages difficult and slow. Economic renewal is critical because per capita incomes dropped by one-third from 2001 to 2004 and there has been a similar decline in the last two years. And a credible political or peace process is essential to restoring hope and showing that diplomacy can still produce a two-state solution.

While mobility would benefit every Palestinian, it will be hard to produce quickly. Israeli security officials have told me that each day they are still getting an average of 63 threat alerts of planned attacks against Israelis from the West Bank. In the eyes of the Israeli security establishment, their presence and restriction on Palestinian movement is what enables them to stop the attacks and prevent bombs from going off in Israel. Don't expect Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak to change his attitude on lifting checkpoints until he is satisfied that the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has the capability and the will to stop terror attacks against Israel—particularly at a time when Hamas has an interest in undoing any possible progress. And Barak has been signaling that the Palestinian Authority is a long way from being able to play such a role.⁵

Economically, there would be a dramatic change felt by nearly all Palestinians if there were a massive job creation policy. Palestinians were previously the backbone of the Israeli construction industry, but they can no longer work in Israel in any appreciable numbers. Massive housing and infrastructure projects could immediately address unemployment that is functionally about 40 percent in the West Bank. What these projects lack is financing. In 2002, the former leader of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nakayan, financed Sheikh Zayed city in Gaza—a housing project that contained over 700 units, a school, a recreation center and local supporting infrastructure. If the Gulf states, which certainly have no cash flow problems, were to create a fund to finance five such projects in the West Bank now, it would put large numbers of people back to work.

Politically, it is important to have an active peace process that is credible. But I heard over and over again from Palestinians that the worst outcome would be raising expectations and then failing to deliver on them. Could the international meeting on Middle East peace—chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—provide the means to show that there is a reason for hope and that diplomacy can yet fulfill Pales-

⁵“No Peace with Palestinians Imminent, Says Barak”, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 10, 2007.

tinian aspirations for independence and statehood? It can if it meets two tests. First, it must not be disconnected from day-to-day realities and, second, it must yield tangible results that actually get implemented. In practical terms, an international meeting that offers broad abstractions without improvements in daily life will not be credible. In fact, an international meeting that has no meaningful follow-up or follow-through will only add to cynicism, strengthening the Hamas narrative that negotiations produce nothing and violence is the only answer.

Given these realities, the most immediate priority must be in the economic domain. Job creation needs to be the focus—recognizing that putting people back to work in real jobs will buy time and provide a psychological boost to the new Palestinian Authority. But this priority must be approached with a sense of urgency. Donor meetings have traditionally been great on rhetoric but slow on delivery. Getting immediate financing for construction from the Gulf states (via a \$500 million fund) so contracting and job sign-ups can begin before the end of the year (and preferably even before the scheduled international meeting in late November) should be priority number one. Pressing President Abbas to push for Fatah reform at the same time will also be needed to show that Fatah renewal is actually happening and must be priority number two. While it will be hard to produce a great deal on mobility quickly, Israeli and Palestinian security cooperation should be the third priority—with an eye toward both establishing security arrangements for crossing points to facilitate commerce and also determining how Palestinians could assume security responsibilities in some locales on a rolling basis. Under this system, they succeed in fulfilling their security responsibilities and would also gain freedom of movement.

Tony Blair, the envoy for the Middle East quartet (the United States, the European Union, Russia and the UN), should take the leading role on these priorities. However, there is great skepticism—especially among Palestinians—that he can or will produce anything. In his new position, Blair represents everyone and nobody. He needs the backing of the U.S. administration to show he has authority and is capable of delivering.

And Don't Forget the Saudis. . . .

SAUDI HELP is critical. They have a significant role to play in Iran, Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In the case of Iran, the Saudis have their own very strong reasons for not wanting the state to go nuclear. Saudi Arabia is less secure if it has to arm itself with nuclear weapons to deter a nuclear Iran. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's security is best served if it—and Iran—remain non-nuclear states. And they have a part to play in any successful strategy to stop Iran from atomically arming. This is a role no less important than the one we need the Europeans to adopt. Furthermore, they may also be instrumental in affecting the European readiness to stop investing in Iran.

The Saudis have enormous financial clout in Europe and elsewhere. Their holdings, investments and prospective investments give them significant leverage. If the Saudis were to go to European banks, investment houses, oil companies and governments and say “Doing business with Iran will mean losing business with us”, it could have a real effect. (Of course, the Saudis could wield both negative and positive incentives by either penalizing those who do business with Iran or rewarding those who stop doing so.)

And we should not underestimate Saudi Arabia's role in the upcoming international

meeting on Middle East peace. Without their involvement, the international meeting is likely to look no different than previous meetings involving the Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians—meetings that have been held often and produced little. But if they are to participate and the meeting is to yield meaningful results, Secretary Rice will need to work closely with the Saudis and others to carefully prepare. This meeting, which President Bush announced with some fanfare, will not take care of itself. Secretary Rice must negotiate clear understandings in advance: The details of the agenda must be worked out and not left to chance; the terms of reference must be understood the same way by all the attendees; the steps that will follow the meeting must be agreed on beforehand. None of this will be accomplished in a meeting or two—Secretary Rice will have to shuttle and grind this out with the participants. Indeed, the more she seeks to accomplish on permanent status issues like Jerusalem, refugees and borders—and she apparently would like a text outlining the principles of agreement on these core existential issues to be adopted or endorsed by the meeting participants⁶—the more she will need to invest in prolonged and difficult negotiations.

At this point, the more ambitious objectives the secretary seeks may be beyond reach. If so, she must pursue more modest ones and achieve them. Perhaps Condoleezza Rice could focus on a declaration of principles on Israeli and Palestinian state-to-state relations, a process for further Israeli withdrawals in the West Bank tied to security responsibilities and milestones on the Palestinian side and the creation of working groups to fashion an approach to implementation. Either way—whether going for more ambitious objectives or more attainable ones—the secretary must throw herself into difficult and time-consuming negotiations with all those who will attend the meeting. The Saudis may be an especially demanding case. They have announced that if they are to attend the conference, Syria and Lebanon must be invited and all the permanent status issues be seriously discussed. Secretary Rice will have to work out the details of the meeting in a way that persuades them to attend.

In 1991, then-Secretary of State James Baker had to break the taboo on direct negotiations between Israel and her neighbors (other than Egypt). To produce that breakthrough was no small accomplishment, and it required Secretary Baker to intensively negotiate the pre-Madrid conference terms with all the participants. He used constant discussions with the Europeans, Soviets, Egyptians and Saudis, along with his own meetings with Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, to exert leverage on Syria and gain its agreement to the Madrid terms. A great deal of statecraft was involved. Secretary Rice will have a different challenge, but will find that she too must engage in intensive statecraft if the upcoming November international meeting is to contribute to the president's stated objective for it.

IS BROKERING a deal between the Saudis and Iranians on Iraq compatible with getting the Saudis to use their financial clout against Iran on the nuclear issue or consistent with Saudi financing of the non-Hamas Palestinians? It can be, provided we don't approach the Saudis piecemeal and we explain how everything fits into a strategic approach: Containing Iraqi turmoil is in Saudi and Iranian interests—it is not a favor to Iran and it is good for regional stability. Stopping Iran from going nuclear and preventing Hamas from coming to dominate the Palestinian movement is necessary to prevent Iran from gaining great leverage over the Middle East and for preventing the Saudis

⁶Steven Erlanger, "Events Prod U.S. to Make New Push for Mideast Deal", *The New York Times*, August 17, 2007.

from being kept perpetually on the defensive. Here, the secretary of state has to play a major role in making the strategic case.

Every challenge we face in the Middle East is daunting. But whether dealing with Iraq, Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or other regional problems, there are pathways available for transforming or at least ameliorating our current situation. Since the world won't stand still until after our presidential election, we don't have the luxury of waiting for the next administration to tackle the challenges of the Middle East. It is essential to urge the Bush Administration to become clearer in defining its objectives and identifying the means it can and must employ to increase the probability of achieving them. With the serious application of statecraft and the essential understanding of what it will take to marry our objectives and our means, we can put ourselves on more hopeful footing—even in a region that appears hopeless. □

A Broken Engagement

Barbara Slavin

IT MAY seem counterintuitive, but September 11 produced an opening for improved U.S.-Iran relations that could have enhanced the U.S. ability to marginalize the number one threat to U.S. and Western interests: fundamentalist, suicidal Sunni terrorism. However, continued U.S. antipathy pushed Iran to become more of a strategic competitor, leading it to retain tactical links to Al-Qaeda as well as to bolster radical Shi'a Muslim groups and other proxies. Instead of dividing our enemies, the Bush Administration united them against us.

Among the worst consequences of the Bush Administration's post-9/11 strategic choices is the unabated rise of Iran. The U.S. decision to reject Iranian overtures

for comprehensive negotiations in 2003 and to topple Saddam Hussein without a prior regional consensus about what would replace him has strengthened the most hard-line elements of Iran's Islamic government, spurred its nuclear program, revived its expansionist ambitions and undermined pro-U.S. political factions throughout the Middle East. The question now is whether it is still possible to reach an understanding with Iran that will temper its motivation to play the spoiler and strengthen forces within the country that seek an end to extremism and isolation.

Immediately after 9/11, Iranians distinguished themselves by spontaneously demonstrating in sympathy with the victims of the attacks. At a multinational meeting on Afghanistan at the UN, then-Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi passed then-Secretary of State Colin Powell a note that read: "The United States should know that the Iranian people and the Iranian government stand

Barbara Slavin is senior diplomatic reporter at *USA Today* on leave as a Jennings Randolph fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace and the author of *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (St. Martin's Press, 2007).